

# THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE IS OBSOLETE? COMMON SENSE;

ADDRESSED TO THE

I N H A B I T A N T S  
O F  
A M E R I C A,

On the following interesting

S U B J E C T S.

- I. Introduction.
- II. Of the Origin and Design of Higher Education in general, with concise Remarks on Higher Education in the United States.
- III. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.
- IV. Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs.
- V. On the present Ability of America to Educate the People, with some miscellaneous Reflections.

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When my country, into which I had just set my foot, was set on Fire about my ears, it was time to stir. It was time for every Man to stir.

THOMAS PAINE.

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WASHINGTON, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA;

Printed and sold by Richard Vedder, in *Seventeenth Street, N.W.*  
& Kathlene Collins, Douglas Lederman, Scott Jaschik, in *Eighteenth Street, N.W.*

M M V I I I.



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*Founded in 2006, the Center for College Affordability and Productivity (CCAP) is an independent, not-for-profit center based in Washington, D.C., dedicated to research and recommendations on the issues of rising costs and stagnant efficiency in higher education. Founder Richard Vedder, vedder@ohio.edu, is a distinguished professor of economics at Ohio University and a member of the Spellings/U.S. Department of Education Commission on the Future of Higher Education.*

*Inside Higher Ed was founded in 2004 by three executives with decades of expertise in higher education journalism and recruitment. They believed that higher education was evolving quickly and radically, and that the time was right for new models of providing information and career services for professionals in academe. More than 50,000 higher education professionals start their day with Inside Higher Ed's daily news update e-mail.*

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## P R A I S E   F O R   C O M M O N   S E N S E

"Wick Sloane is an informed and thoughtful analyst of higher education and is properly concerned about its future, recognizing the dangers many of his peers conveniently avoid. His writings are provocative and iconoclastic and always worth reading, for their ideas and their style.

*Common Sense* is certainly one of his best, as an idea and as a great read."

*CHARLES MILLER, FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS SYSTEM*

*AND THE SPELLINGS/U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION*

*COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION*

"His solutions may not appeal to many, but leaders in all walks of life need to think through his ringing indictment of American higher education for the extent to which it serves a mandarin class while almost totally undermining our universally shared democratic values."

*JOHN STRASSBURGER, PRESIDENT, URSINUS COLLEGE*

"Caveat Emptor. Wick Sloane is probably wrong. I am in violent disagreement with many of his assertions. But I am so glad he wrote this piece, because it made me think hard about the value of education and formal certification by the University in the 21st Century. Reading this will challenge you and open your mind."

*KARIM R. LAKHANI, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
AND RICHARD HODGSON FELLOW, HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL*

"Wick Sloane, a man who could find easier, more prestigious work, spends his time teaching working-class kids at an urban community college. We should read his provocative essay thoughtfully, for it represents the lessons he has learned from young people who scrape every penny together to afford an education."

*LINDA BILMES, PROFESSOR, HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL, HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
AND COAUTHOR OF THE THREE TRILLION DOLLAR WAR:  
THE TRUE COST OF THE IRAQ CONFLICT*

## P R A I S E   F O R   C O M M O N   S E N S E

"A very provocative and well written essay with many 'Wickisms' to delight the reader."

*DAVID W. BROWN, AUTHOR OF ORGANIZATION SMARTS,  
FORMER DEPUTY MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY  
AND FORMER PRESIDENT, BLACKBURN COLLEGE*

"I did read this. I found it too compelling to stop. Before the Gutenberg press, in the 14th century, students at the University of Bologna would gather for an hour to listen to the professor read aloud from one of the few precious books in the university. Now the books are cheap, but students still gather to listen to the professor speak from their lecture notes. What's wrong with this picture? Why don't universities innovate? Why is the four-year B.A. sacred? Wick Sloane attacks the sacred cows of education and asks the provocative questions. This is a must-read for anyone who truly cares about creating an educational system that serves society."

*ERIC VOGT, CHAIRMAN, INTERCLASS*

"Wick Sloane impolitely insists in this incendiary pamphlet that we actually think about higher education. Wielding questions like a surgical laser, he exposes much of the received wisdom about college as archaic, inequitable or plain wrong. His proposals will bring howls from the educational powers-that-be, proving the old adage: it's not injustice that stings, it's justice."

*SCOTT SHANE, REPORTER, NATIONAL SECURITY, THE NEW YORK TIMES*

"Don't believe Wick Sloane. There's a way to fund higher education for everyone. Do all of it on credit and securitize the loans, then capitalize and securitize all the graduates' future earnings. The Chinese are looking for higher-return securities. It will all work."

*THOMAS HOUT, UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG*

## P R A I S E   F O R   *C O M M O N   S E N S E*

"With strong street cred in both the private sector and public education, Sloane brings an idealist's passion for improving higher education together with a CFO's tough-love emphasis on metrics and accountability. Like most truly original thinkers, he begins by questioning what others view as a postulate and arrives at a proposal for revamping our higher education system that is provocative but nonetheless grounded in pure common sense."

*STEVE GARDNER, GARDNER-NELSON ADVERTISING*

"Wick Sloane is onto something. He knows that higher education is about as likely to reform itself from the inside as Wall Street is. His provocative ideas need to be considered by a broader audience if we are to use the new public management to reform this critical sector."

*PAUL BRACKEN, PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT, YALE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT*

"With wit, perception, and facts, Wick Sloane pulls the rug out from under higher education in America. This is a revolutionary tract. I have never read a better description of what's wrong with our colleges and universities and how to put things right. I recommend *Common Sense* to anyone who has been to college, knows someone in college, or is paying for somebody's college education."

*GRACE TERZIAN, HUDSON INSTITUTE*

"At a time when it is an economic imperative that all citizens be educated to the fullest extent possible, the higher education delivery model is woefully antiquated. *Common Sense* offers a refreshing proposal for making higher education meet the needs of all ages. It deserves to be widely read."

*RICK MATTOON, SENIOR ECONOMIST AND ECONOMIC ADVISOR,  
FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF CHICAGO AND ADJUNCT FACULTY,  
KELLOGG SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY*

## P R A I S E   F O R   C O M M O N   S E N S E

"Wick Sloane has been laboring in education fields for many years and in all capacities – as student, Board of Ed member, chief financial officer, teacher, innovator. He fully knows of which he speaks. His proposal, succinctly put forward in this elegant tribute to Thomas Paine, outlines how we can do better with our higher learning institutions by scrubbing their innards without destroying their foundations. His arguments now need to be addressed by a national conference of all relevant players in which his central thesis can be debated dispassionately and with some prospect of being realized."

*STEPHEN B. MIDDLEBROOK, RETIRED VICE CHAIRMAN, AETNA LIFE & CASUALTY*

"Wick Sloane has written a pedagogical think piece for our time. Although I don't endorse every path he suggests, I wholeheartedly support the rigor of deconstructing our educational system. It is long over-due as America falls behind every year because we stick to entrenched notions of how to teach and who is bright or valuable based on antiquated notions. *KUDOS.* Here's to real thought."

*WICKHAM BOYLE, AUTHOR OF A MOTHER'S ESSAYS FROM GROUND ZERO  
AND EDITOR, THRIVENYC*

"It's not only a brilliant, courageous, and eccentric mind on display here, it's a large heart. Wick Sloane wants nothing less than to upend the elitism in the present system of education and share the pieces equally among all deserving students. He asks only that the people on the lower end of the economic spectrum be given a fair chance. Experts may argue with his specifics, but his idealism is based in the hard reality of numbers and facts, and there is a moral sensibility here that the nation desperately needs."

*ROLAND MERULLO, AUTHOR OF BREAKFAST WITH BUDDHA,  
REVERE BEACH BOULEVARD, AND GOLFING WITH GOD*

"I'll pass."

*MORTON OWEN SCHAPIRO, PRESIDENT, WILLIAMS COLLEGE*

## P R A I S E   F O R   C O M M O N   S E N S E

"How reassuring to discover that the principles inspiring Wick Sloane's insights are original in both senses of the word. His fresh and bold application of Thomas Paine's challenge to America at the time of its founding is an important reminder that democracy is education's greatest gift. Reading this provocative and passionate pamphlet can and should restore us to Common Sense."

*ALEXANDRA MARSHALL, AUTHOR OF A WORK OF NONFICTION  
AND FIVE NOVELS, MOST RECENTLY THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS*

"Wick Sloane's modest proposal for reforming American higher education may be subversive and utterly impractical, but it's worth reading as an eloquent and impassioned critique of how our traditional practices work against broader access for all Americans."

*BARMAK NASSIRIAN, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF  
COLLEGIATE REGISTRARS AND ADMISSIONS OFFICERS*

"Too many policy proposals are about vague 'principles' that don't translate into anything concrete enough to bring change or promote constructive discussion. Wick Sloane's proposal is not of that type. It is real and well-reasoned. That doesn't mean it's the right way to go. But it will spur the type of debate that can bring better ideas and bolder innovations."

*ROBERT SHIREMAN, PRESIDENT, THE INSTITUTE FOR COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS*

"Wick Sloane is crazy. Crazy to put up with the bureaucracies of higher education, crazy to take on the status quo and crazy to try to do something about it. Scary thing is he is right for the most part on his comments. He continues to be an engrossing read if not aggravating some of the time."

*ANDREW GHERTNER, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, CUSHMAN & WAKEFIELD*



## F O R W A R D

R EVOLUTION is my purpose.

Why don't we eliminate the bachelor's degree? It's only common sense.

Before cashiering this question, consider a passage from the introduction to patriot Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense*, published in 1776.

*"Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason."*

No, I don't mean eliminate those colleges or those courses or even those professors – just the degree. This revolution affirms the value of an education. Let what people want to do with their lives determine what courses and credits they need when. This revolution is about zeroing in on *what* we need to learn *when* and *how*. Why do we have to pack four years of expensive learning into a life so early on? Why do we dump the full cost at the start of young adulthood, with compounding interest?

Can anyone today reconcile this system with common sense? Why do we believe that a high school English

English teacher, a cloud-computing specialist, and a mechanical engineer all need the same number of credits earned during the same amount of time in order to begin their lives? Let what people want to do with their lives determine which courses and credits they need to take. Why? Common sense.

In the United States, as a practical matter, people do not have an education until they have a bachelor's degree. Is there anything at all resembling common sense to support the current four-year, 36-course structure of a bachelor's degree? In defending the high cost of education, college and university presidents and business officers have taken everything into account except the fundamental cost of delivery. In M.B.A. speak, the central cost driver of a college education is not health insurance, salaries, rising oil costs, or even costly academic journals. It is the four-year, 36-course structure that determines the cost of a college degree. This model, leading to annual tuitions and fees of \$25,000 at public colleges and \$50,000 at many private ones, crushes families with \$100,000 to \$200,000 in cost and debt.

Impossible to imagine the end of the bachelor's degree packaged into four years? Most of us – households or other enterprises – from time to time take a look at the fundamentals of our budgets and ask, "Is there another way?" As an example, consider the bloodless iPod and MP3 revolution. For years the multibillion-dollar music industry dictated that music would only be available in units (vinyl records) of thirty minutes or so, for a fixed price. Later the slightly

slightly longer-running CD was based on the same model – though for a lot more money. What happened? A demographic cohort, people roughly sixteen to twenty-five years old who wanted access to one song at a time in a form that could easily be shared among friends, revolted and created a new market when the music industry refused any modifications or price breaks. The initial market demand, in response to the greed and rigidity of the music industry, was for free music.

The rebels invented the new distribution system with available tools, linking MP3 and Napster and file sharing. This revolution – revising what we listen to when and how – drove the music industry to agree to easy online distribution at 99 cents a song. Common sense triumphed over intransigence and greed, and market peace was restored. Now, what is the demographic cohort saddled with the costs of today's four-year college model?

I am the first to agree that education is priceless. I question the outlay in time and dollars of the bachelor's degree. College probably does lead to higher lifetime earnings but not right after college. Finance 101 shows that the cash flows of an investment in college do not line up. The bulk of the student-loan debt is due when a graduate's earnings are the lowest. Public debate focuses on how to finance the cost of the current model. The college-loan scandals, exposing the brotherhood of high tuitions and delayed payment at high interest rates, may be a signal that the student mob is restless over the cost of the fixed, four-year model. Discussions about true cost reduction are rare

rare. I mean here the cost of annual institutional spending, not just the cost of tuition.

In many markets, as cost rises entrepreneurs start looking for cheaper delivery of the same goods or services. Finding a less expensive way to deliver a bachelor's degree while maintaining the historical four-year model is not likely. I investigated the historical origins of this model, which I will detail later, and there is no good reason for using the four-year bachelor's degree model today.

The common-sense revolution asks what does the nation need in terms of basic education? The need is not for millions of people with expensive four-year degrees. The real need is for millions of citizens with the critical thinking and communication skills to sustain a sound economy and a just society.

To achieve this, my lunatic dream is national literacy in ten years. To set up a raucous debate, I'll even define literacy: that every citizen, by age twenty-one, be able to pass the Advanced Placement exams in English Language and Composition and in Statistics. These language and math skills, at the AP level, are a foundation for all thinking skills, which will allow the students, the citizens, to find their own way. Successfully passing these tests would not be a precondition for voting or any other rights of U.S. citizens. It wouldn't imply a free Ph.D. or M.D. or even a bachelor's degree for all. What this would require of the educational system is focus on the goal and the reallocation of funds to accomplish the job. Achievement  
of

of this goal, for institutions and for individuals, would be a prerequisite for any subsequent federal funding.

In my prescription above, I side with Hippocrates and his oath for stumped physicians: “First, do no harm.” The ability to read and to think critically, to write clearly, and to size up a situation in numbers will certainly do no harm. These language and statistics skills may not create or sustain an economy where everyone is a billionaire. My plan may not even create full employment all of the time. It’s precisely because we cannot know what the future will require that I stake my belief in reading, writing, and statistics. The objective is three-fold: to enable individual initiative and self-reliance, to minimize excess social costs paid in taxes, and to open doors for those whose weak education otherwise sentences them to poverty.

What workplace today wouldn’t benefit from employees with these AP-level skills? To figure this all out and to understand the issues better, I have embedded myself at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston. Electric utility lineworkers need these skills. Anyone on a manufacturing floor needs these skills. Nurses need these skills. I’ve done hard time teaching in classrooms at Yale and at Bunker Hill. Given even modest support, the Bunker Hill students can meet any goal that the Yale students can.

Unless individuals can apply independent, critical thinking to their own situations, the nation is headed for trouble. With these AP-level skills, citizens will have a better

better chance of finding a job and then recognizing trouble or opportunity down the road. Citizens will be more likely to read a lease or a car-loan or student-loan agreement with a critical eye. When citizens do see trouble, these skills will provide abilities essential to the survival of our democracy. I'm looking at the often overlooked back end of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, the right "to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Make these reading, writing, and statistics skills the portals to further education. All I hope for are citizens who can cast a vote, propose a better idea on the job, or create a better job; parents who can, with confidence, choose a doctor for their child; and students who know better than to pay tuition with a college-sponsored credit card.

To the dismay of skeptics and my many critics, I do know a lot about teaching and education and finance and budgets and huge operations. I concede that many will disagree with passing these two AP exams as a goal. I've heard "That's impossible." I may not be right, but that doesn't mean I'm wrong. I proposed this AP idea, substituting physics for statistics, when I was on the school board of an 8,000-student K-12 school system in the 1990s. I should have pushed harder. My disappointment was that my critics were those whose children really needed the skills.

I've done my homework on the likelihood of these AP-level skills being achieved, and it's possible for ninety percent of the nation's students to achieve this skill level, although not by way of the current educational teaching model

model. Credible urban public school educators agree that this modest proposal is possible. Starting with faculty training and support and curricula that adapt to individuals and don't force this achievement on small children, or even many teenagers. Educators know how to teach these skills successfully to a wide range of students. Community colleges teach these skills already, but not as a designated priority versus other skills.

I don't seek to persuade you of anything. I ask you to simply read on, realizing only that such skill levels are quite possible. The funding would come from rearranging current spending. Common sense undermines the current system. My revolution aims to clear the way for better ideas.

While I may know something about education, I do not know how to start a revolution. How can I present this outlandish assessment and proposal with any hope of a hearing? I look to the structure of Paine's *Common Sense* as my model. Paine (1737-1809) was a man with a mind and a pen. With words Paine stirred the nation to be reborn. I remain in awe that a 19,000-word pamphlet came off hand presses in 1776 in Harry Potter quantities. And that people read and debated the pamphlet. In these times of electronic communication that favors short attention spans, I won't go for as many words or pages. Let *Common Sense* structure my own presentation of common sense.

The headings that follow are from Paine's *Common Sense* and will serve for my own, except where noted.

## I. Introduction

## I. Introduction.

TODAY in the United States the bill for higher education – and specifically the four-year bachelor's degree, a centuries-old model – keeps increasing. Whatever the return on investment of going to college, the cost – what customers pay, discounted or not – is high, shutting out millions and crippling millions more with debt. For numbers, pick a study, any study. No studies I can find have low numbers of individuals in need of more education.

We, the people, allocate to the institutional providers of these degrees billions and billions of dollars in federal aid and subsidies and tax benefits and research funding. Budget discussions are at the margin – more or less of the same. Should we add one more section of European History? Does the lab need five or six new computers? No one asks whether this is the right system for the 21st century. Furthermore, the debate over public funds for education does not consider what a citizenry truly needs to know. Nor, for higher education, does the debate ask how the basic ability to write and to reason, in words and numbers, compares to, say, a whole degree in Events Management or General Studies.

Imagine a car hits a child beside you, crossing the street. Imagine the ambulance is horsedrawn and that the hospital is 14th century. Without dumb luck, the child would die. What's the difference in sending our children to college today? Why is college still built on a model designed centuries

centuries ago? Death from an obsolete education is less gory than death in a car accident but no less dead. Death by weak education is poverty. And why is no one questioning the four-year model?

Thomas Paine knew and told us so in his *Common Sense* introduction:

*“...a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom.”*

## II. Of the Origin and Design of Higher Education in general, with concise Remarks on Higher Education in the United States.

I CALL this second section of my query into higher education in the 21st century “Of the Origin and Design of the Four-Year Bachelor’s Degree Model.” Or, perhaps, “Four More Years.”

I’m a scrounger, not a scholar. Looking around, I found a consistent story on what saddled us with this model in *The Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum*, a 1978 report for the Carnegie Commission on Policy Studies in Higher Education.

Western history traces academic degrees to the University of Bologna in the 13th and 14th centuries. (You could say that today’s multibillion-dollar educational juggernaut

juggernaut began with “baloney.” And this is not B.S.) These were doctoral degrees. After about four years, a doctoral student became a baccalaureus, defined as able to tutor and lecture the new students. Only *Wikipedia*, in my research, acknowledges that the University of Al-Karaouine in Fez, Morocco and Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt preceded Bologna both in opening doors and in granting multiyear degrees.

The University of Paris and Oxford had similar programs. Cambridge followed, and from Oxford and Cambridge the B.A. and the M.A. made their way to us in the New World. Harvard awarded the first nine bachelor's degrees in 1642. The rules required an undergraduate to study a set curriculum, which took about three years and ten months to complete.

Thus began the U.S. higher educational system that remains firmly in place 366 years later. In rooting around, I found all sorts of dumbounding information. For example, there really is something called “Academic Time.” This is classes and courses and credits and semesters.

Innovation in college education is hard to find. The marketing material from Williams College implied that the 4-1-4 plan, four courses each semester with one intensive course in January, was Williams' own innovation. However, Eckerd College appears to be the inventor, or at least the first adapter of this plan, starting in 1961. Colorado College covers the same number of courses per year

year, but does this one course at a time. If there are any other innovations to the four-year bachelor's degree, I missed them. The only unintentional change is that many students now need five and six years to finance and arrange the four years' worth of courses. What better evidence that the four-year model is broken?

Credits, as opposed to just courses, appeared in the 1870s. The idea was to track student progress in various programs and enable institutions to evaluate students from different colleges. Harvard often figures into introduction of new ideas. (Sadly, my own alma mater, Yale, does not.) Harvard president Charles W. Elliot, in his 1869 inaugural speech, declared his support not only for credits but also the elective system that let students vary their individual paths to the same degree. Colleges and high schools all began to measure progress toward a bachelor's degree in terms of credits, not courses. Examinations determined the achievement of credits, and one name for this system of learning was "progress by examination."

The definition of a credit has grown more specific. In Academic Time, one credit is a minimum of fifty minutes of "contact hours" per week for a minimum of fifteen weeks. The familiar one-semester course, then, meets three hours per week for the semester for three credits. A compressed course, for the same number of credits, shortens the calendar time, not the classroom time. In higher ed speak, these "contact hours" are called "seat time." Showing up, then, remains the essential credit measure.

The

The latest suggestion to supplement “seat time” as a measure is called “outcomes assessment.” Higher education continues to threaten revolt over this one – the simple question of how to assess what happened over the semester.

What higher education actually succeeds in teaching a student – as assessed by the student – is not a measure today. Colleges can grade students, but those same students, as graduates, are not competent to grade colleges? Faculty make able assessments all the time. Why do the institutions fear assessing themselves?

Designing and measuring higher education via this credit system has many sensible and orderly characteristics. For students fortunate enough to spend their four years at the same college, the system works. However, millions of students today do not complete their education at a single institution. At least half the students in higher education in the U.S. today begin at two-year community colleges. The unreported scandal is how few colleges accept transfer credits from each other.

The credit system at Bunker Hill Community College, where I am an adjunct professor, is an illustrative example of the challenge students face when trying to transfer credits. For its students to transfer bought-and-paid-for credits, Bunker Hill must negotiate complex agreements, known as articulation agreements, department by department, with each of four University of Massachusetts campuses. Remember that a community college only purports to cover freshman and sophomore years.

years. These agreements require endless debates about basic entry-level courses, not certification for brain surgery. A course that one student can transfer to UMass Boston might not be transferable for another student going to UMass Lowell. Why so many hurdles? Won't a student without prerequisite knowledge, regardless of credits, flunk an upper-level course?

Variations of this credit-loss story happen all over the U.S. Since it's the poorer students who must often cobble together their degrees, the result is their having to retake courses or take additional courses. I've found no reliable studies on this, but I'd have no trouble believing that this situation adds extra semesters and 10 percent or more to the cost of college for the students who can least afford the time, let alone the money.

That the U.S. has the best higher education system in the world – demonstrable by Nobel Prizes and all the international students – is a statement heard often at any gathering of one or more educational leaders. I agree with this. But how, if at all, does that greatness affect the students shut out by the four-year structure? This blunt question is seldom raised in higher education or American political discussions. S. Frederick Starr, the Central Asia scholar, when he was president of Oberlin College in 1991 proposed reducing the cost of college by cutting the bachelor's degree from four to three years. His challenge to innovate and provide an education as good or better in less time and at less cost went no further than the op-ed page of *The New York Times*.

III. Of

### III. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.

*“When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary.” – Common Sense*

The Declaration of Independence blasts taxation without representation. Paine, in *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*, helped the colonists throw off their shackles of monarchical tyranny. Or did we?

These questions of monarchy and hereditary succession in higher education collide with the conundrum of U.S. history. Are we against monarchy and hereditary succession? Or, are we in favor of all such systems – as long as we are members thereof and they open doors for our children? Monarchy and hereditary succession are descriptive of how higher education in the U.S. today operates through an allocation system that decides who receives an education. This sorting of those seeking an education does not have the practical goal of allocating to society individuals trained for jobs that reflect their talents and skills. This sorting, or allocation, is a rationing, through admissions and scholarships, that determines who will and who will not receive a bachelor’s degree. Though billions in public dollars go into this rationing, colleges and universities control this rationing system with no public oversight.

The Ivies, Stanford, Duke, Grinnell, Williams, Amherst, and a few others offer tickets to the upper class. Success at these campuses ensures seats at interviews with top-dollar

top-dollar firms such as Goldman Sachs and McKinsey. The major research universities – Berkeley, Michigan, Wisconsin, M.I.T. – vacuum in dollars from science and industry that go to anyone already in the front door and on his or her way to a Ph.D.

Hereditary succession reaches beyond private colleges that favor the children of alumni. The so-called flagship state universities, which have rigorous admissions standards, are in theory open to all, but they are tacitly geared toward students who live in communities with well-funded school systems that prepare them to meet those standards. A financial aid officer at University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana, one such flagship research university, once explained to me that the availability of financial aid wasn't a big problem at his school. The students who met the admissions requirements could afford to pay. In contrast, his colleague at UI-Carbondale, which has less rigorous admissions criteria, never had enough aid money for those who needed it. There is no clearer example of economic monarchy and hereditary succession.

The top schools graduate those who go on to state legislatures and Congress and the U.S. Senate and careers as captains of industry. Together, those bodies set the national fiscal policies that govern the cost of college. As discussed in another Center for College Affordability and Productivity paper, the federal government allocates billions of dollars in federal subsidies – aid to students, research funding, and tax benefits. The subsidy via federal tax policy at my alma maters, Williams College and Yale, is between \$25,000 and \$35,000

\$35,000 per undergraduate per year. This is not per undergraduate on financial aid, this is per each undergraduate. At Bunker Hill Community College, arcane and outdated rules and regulations often prevent even a single mother working two jobs from receiving a full federal Pell Grant of barely \$4,000.

Subsidization without representation describes our current higher education system. The poor and even the middle-class college students, unlike those at the Ivies and research universities, have no voice in the public debate and lobbying that influence federal spending. The billions of dollars in subsidies to the research universities and private colleges and universities are the black budgets of higher education in the U.S. (“Black budgets” is the name for the classified military and intelligence spending most of us will never see.) What the proper national policies should be is a matter for democratic debate. Right now there is no debate at all on these issues, to the immense benefit of the monarchies and the sons and daughters of the fortunate.

History shows how comfortable we, the people, are with the monarchy. The muckraker Upton Sinclair is most famous for his 1906 novel *The Jungle*, which exposed the horrific work conditions in the Chicago meatpacking industry. In 1922, Sinclair published *The Goose-Step – A Study of American Higher Education*, another blistering critique. The chapter titles still work today. Chapter VI is “The University of the House of Morgan,” about the cozy relations between banks and higher education. What of colleges and universities today and lenders for student loans?

loans? Or institutions receiving fees in exchange for exclusive right to issue students credit cards at usurious interest rates? Chapter V, “Interlocking Directorates,” describes just that. What are rules for procurement from firms that employ trustees? Or endowment investing? Sinclair could well wonder today what has changed. Spring for the book at \$7.97, second hand on Amazon, read it, and learn. Or hit the library or Google Books and read it for free.

As far as common sense and the bachelor's degree go, I don't ask anyone to take sides on the issue of the current structure of monarchy and hereditary succession and whether it is right for the 21st century. But again I ask, does this four-year structure make sense? Is this four-year structure a defensible allocation of public resources that will actually succeed in building a robust workforce and an argumentative republic capable of intelligent debate?

#### IV. Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs.

PAINES words introducing this section of *Common Sense* fit here:

*“In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense; and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings*

*feelings to determine for themselves; that he will put on, or rather that he will not put off the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day."*

Who among us claims to be accountable for those who are not now in college but ought to be, who have the ability but not the money or savvy to navigate the system? No one. Why not?

In education discussions, a balanced institutional budget, public or private, is the operational yardstick. If the institutions are operating and solvent, no one asks who is not enrolled. Shouldn't we, as a society, use a measure that takes into consideration those able students who are shut out? Many decry that students are shut out, but no one is doing anything about the lockout. The education they receive, or not, will determine other social costs the nation will pay. That no one is willing to take responsibility for the millions shut out indicates that, we, the people, are content to pay billions of dollars in social costs instead of billions of dollars for education.

The conventional wisdom among establishment education leaders, citing the Founding Fathers (who left education out of the Constitution), is that the U.S. shouldn't have a national higher education policy. After all, the official reasoning goes, even in the absence of a national policy, our nation has produced the best higher education system in the world.

However

However, if you look at the Department of Education and all the federal programs and regulations, from tax policy to research grants from the National Science Foundation and the Department of Defense, as parts of a whole, they add up to an unofficial national policy of magnificent clarity. Our national policy is not outlined in a paper on the Web somewhere. The policy costs billions in tax benefits, in loan subsidies, and in research funding. No one voted on the policy in a meeting. And no plans are on the table to change it.

Our national policy is that private colleges, regardless of wealth, are entitled to subsidies for any purpose via federal tax policy. Our national policy is that federal research grants fund the reimbursement of overhead (never mind the research) that can be 30 percent and higher for some universities. The current federal reimbursement formulas do not incent universities to spend less. I ask you, what business has overhead of 30 percent?

As one piece of evidence that the U.S. system of higher education may benefit from new ideas, consider the recent headlines of tens of thousands of new layoffs – now called buyouts – by Ford and General Motors, once leaders of the global automobile industry. How long has this industry collapse been going on? Does anyone dispute that the collapse came not from surprise attacks by new ideas but by the failure of these industrial giants to grapple with very visible issues about emissions and fuel efficiency and costs including health care? How many products of U.S. higher education have been managers and leaders in the

U.S.

U.S. auto industry for decades? Perhaps the time has come to ask higher education for an explanation? Or for a solution beyond four more years for all.

Remember, the implied federal subsidy per student at Williams and Yale is between \$25,000 and \$35,000 per year. That figure is from conservative estimates of the tax-exempt endowment returns and the tax-deductible donations each year. This is at least twice the cost per student at any community college. Our national policy is that the indoor golf-driving nets at Williams College, paid for by tax-deducted dollars, are more important than Pell Grants for community college students working a night shift while going to school. In spite of some recent squawks about tax-free endowments, no one has so far proposed revisions of the federal tax policies that allow this inequity. Furthermore, during federal debates Pell Grants are always at risk, and eligibility requirements change often.

Our unintended, accidental national policy prompts some formidable questions that remain unasked. One concerns simple capacity analysis. Everyone who will be going to college in the next decade is already born. How does this number of people, without presuming to estimate what percentage of them will actually attend college, reconcile with the current available capacity of U.S. higher education institutions in classrooms and classroom seats alone? No one knows. Colleges and universities continue to build and build and build, thanks to substantial federal subsidies. Before investing millions in public subsidies for the new science buildings at Brown, do we look for empty space

space at Stanford or the University of Texas? No. And in the midst of all this construction, a community college has no funds available to help students working three jobs learn basic math and writing. Common sense gone missing again. We, the people, appear to have no plans to reconsider the policy that allows such situations.

Now let's take a global view. As an example, consider engineers in India, learning engineering in flawless English at standards qualifying them for their choice of U.S. jobs. Those Indian degrees may not all beat U.S. training today. How about in five years? Just as a point of discussion, how many engineers are U.S. educational institutions producing now? How many are India's producing? Add the graduates now in the pipeline from both countries to the existing workforce today. How does this supply line up with any estimates of demand for engineers? In India? In the U.S.? In the world? No one knows. No one knows the answer to this question when it is applied to surgeons or accountants or lawyers or mathematicians or even adjunct professors at community colleges. Our current national policy is that we should continue to subsidize institutions without even knowing how many graduates are headed into what fields based on whose assumptions of demand.

I took some of these questions that I have raised in this essay to various faculty who have won prizes for teaching. What am I missing, I asked? (Being a guy in a suit, with an M.B.A. and not a Ph.D., I said, leaves the door wide open for errors on my part.) In your opinion, is there

there any common sense in this four-year situation?

According to the answers given by my random sampling of academics with degrees spanning several disciplines, common sense is in short supply. We agreed at the start on the value of education and learning. We agreed that the issue is not wholesale layoffs of faculty. The issue concerns the four-year structure, and, more to the point, what we learn when and how. In hearing what these faculty had to say, I can tell you that as far as managing a college, let alone a policy for the nation, little to nothing of what these faculty know about teaching and learning is being considered by those in charge of higher education. These questions never arose in budget discussions when I was a university chief financial officer. As the people with the most direct contact with students, these teachers and their ideas are simply not part of any debate on allocation of federal resources for higher education in the 21st century.

What happens in the classroom accounts for no more than 20 percent of what great teachers see as necessary to educating students. The professors said that student-to-student encounters outside the classroom have a high impact, as does faculty work with individual students. No systems currently in place, they said, support this knowledge about learning. Faculty make do, the extent to which varies widely.

These professors had no *systemic* preferences for teaching methods, be they tutorials, e-learning, or large lectures. The issue was what each teacher is particularly good

good at. One was a gifted lecturer. She loved that forum and her peers agreed that her impact on those students was second to none. She had no objection to letting others handle the small seminars. The complaint was that the powers that be did not acknowledge this situation and often threw the seminar folks into lecture halls and the lecturers into seminars. This was not a workload issue for these faculty. The situation just provided more evidence of the things crazy bosses do.

As we, as a nation, ponder “the present state of American affairs” in higher education that these questions address, why not turn our immediate attention to achieving the AP English Composition and AP Statistics objective outlined earlier?

#### V. On the present Ability of America to Educate the People, with some miscellaneous Reflections.

“THE present ability of America,” I’ve discovered, has never been greater in terms of the ability to provide education to more people of all backgrounds and abilities. This is in large part due to discoveries in the field of cognitive science, which have helped us to understand how the mind works.

Howard Gardner, a cognitive scientist specializing in the field of education, wrote *The Mind’s New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* in 1985. Note that he included

included the word “revolution” in his subtitle. I found no better summation than Gardner’s, and no evidence to the contrary, that “revolutionary” is the right adjective for discoveries about learning in the past fifty years. Today we know so much more about learning and teaching than anyone at the University of Bologna or University of Al-Karaouine did 800 years ago. Gardner’s new book, *Five Minds for the Future*, moves his ideas even further along and again into questions absent from serious discussions about an educated citizenry today.

Let's return for a moment to the University of Bologna circa the 14th century. Since Gutenberg didn't invent the printing press until 1440, a major pedagogical restraint was a shortage of books. Students gathered in a big room and the professor read the book being studied aloud to them.

In the 21st century we're not hampered by this particular problem. The necessity of the classroom or even the teacher is not at issue. Today in 2008, students still gather in classrooms with a professor at the front of the room. In addition to readily available books and other materials, technology is now enhancing the learning experience.

A community college mathematics teacher told me that the handheld graphing calculator, which makes math easy to see, lets her succeed with 30 percent more students than she could with just numbers and formulas. Her course is just as tough as it was before she made use of this electronic

electronic teaching tool and more students are inspired to go on to more math. (By the way, most of her students can't afford their own graphing calculators, which run about \$100 on Amazon.)

The story illustrates Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences in which he shows that it's not whether people are smart, but how they are smart, and that this ultimately determines how they learn. Different minds learn in different ways. An explanation from a teacher that is clear to me might baffle you. I might understand physics best by starting with Hiroshima and working backwards. You might start with Isaac Newton at the beginning and go forward. But we both can excel at physics. Good educators know how to reach these different minds.

A physics teacher in impoverished Roxbury in Boston, or at Bunker Hill Community College, may face students who have had nothing to eat that day or even the night before. That's not the case for even the low-income students on scholarship at the prep school Phillips Exeter Academy. The students in each place can all learn physics. We know we don't reach them all in the same way, as individuals or members of a social class. Society does not need a Manhattan Project to discover how millions more can learn the essential critical thinking skills in the AP exams in English Composition and in Statistics.

Common sense at this point begs one to acknowledge that the four-year bachelor's degree model, by its very nature, says that there is only one way to learn.

Looking

Looking at college catalogues today, who would ever know that there had been a cognitive revolution? I've found no evidence that U.S. higher education plans to embrace this revolution.

Paine, I suspect, would agree with Daniel Yankelovich, who wrote in his 1991 book *Coming to Public Judgement, Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*:

*"We are a culture of subcultures. The more successful the subculture is...the more it will fall back on its own interests and values. This is the way the world works, and anyone who does not understand it is doomed to frustration and heartbreak."*

## A P P E N D I X

“Why are you going to college, Wick?”

Mick Hagan was asking. It was summer 1974. Mick, forty years old or so, was sitting in the aluminum chair he'd unfolded and set down in the shallow water near the bank of some nameless tributary of the Clark's Fork River by Thompson Falls, Montana. Mick was spin casting for trout. In my daydream I was Nick Adams flycasting in Hemingway's *A Big, Two-Hearted River*. Instead, I was snagging tree branches, leaves, bushes and, more than once, Mick's line with my Royal Coachman fly. That summer I was twenty-two, the go-fer for the U.S. Antimony Corporation, more of an outfit than empire, in Thompson Falls. It was Saturday, and Mick had taken me fishing.

Why was I going to college? “Because I don't want to be a truck driver,” jumped to mind. The reply would have worked fine anywhere at Williams College, where I would be a junior in the fall, or at home back East in Massachusetts, with my parents or any of their friends. But not with Mick.

Mick was a truck driver. He had taught me how to load and drive one of the mine trucks. He had shown me how to use the gears, not the brakes, to go down a steep, narrow mountain road with no guardrails in an overloaded 25,000-pound truck. Mick made sure that

when

when I was sent hundreds of miles to Butte on a solo trip to pick up tons of barrels of steel balls that would grind the rocky ore into smeltable powder, I'd know how to load the truck so it wouldn't tip over. Every morning, if Mick had the chance, he'd pay for my coffee at the café where we would meet John Ely, who always gave us a ride up to the mine.

I bungled some reply to Mick about making choices in life and learning, and I felt ashamed of myself. My pride for my service on the heady Williams Committee for Educational Policy vaporized. I'd never felt so stupid. I wanted to telephone my Ivy League banker father, my professors, the president of Williams, and scream, "Why don't I have a good answer for Mick Hagan, who takes me fishing every Saturday?"

That vivid memory of mine illustrates my premise. Rather than making the four-year model in its current and outdated incarnation the unquestioned educational gold standard for all – when for many it is not a possible, or even desired, option – why not focus on teaching everyone basic yet sophisticated skills needed by any citizen in the 21st century? I mean the reading, thinking, analyzing, writing, and numerical skills needed to pass the AP examinations in English Language and Composition and in Statistics.

As to grand ideas and flights of fancy versus what is possible, read President Lyndon B. Johnson's words of November 8, 1965. The U.S. has often tackled huge challenges

challenges and won. The G.I. Bill, after World War II, may have arisen to stagger the re-entry of veterans into the job market. The result, though, of educating those individuals was the largest economic boom in history. Johnson's address, marking a similar national effort, given at Southwest Texas State College (LBJ's alma mater, where he taught in the early 1930s when it was Southwest Texas State Teachers College), marked the signing of the Higher Education Act that Congress reauthorizes to this day. At the time, Johnson was talking about college. His point was the education necessary for an independent and productive life.

"It means that a high school senior anywhere in this great land of ours can apply to any college or any university in any of the 50 States and not be turned away because his family is poor," LBJ said of his bill.

Referring to an early teaching assignment, Johnson said, "I shall never forget the faces of the boys and the girls in that little Welhausen Mexican School, and I remember even yet the pain of realizing and knowing then that college was closed to practically every one of those children because they were too poor. And I think it was then that I made up my mind that this Nation could never rest while the door to knowledge remained closed to any American. So here, today, back on the campus of my youth, that door is swinging open far wider than it ever did before."

Johnson did not stop with the Higher Education Act. In 1968 LBJ went to Congress to report on the forty  
education

education measures enacted during the prior four years. LBJ recalled President Franklin Roosevelt and his guarantee of Four Freedoms for all citizens: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

“Today – wealthier, more powerful and more able than ever before in our history – our Nation can declare another essential human freedom,” LBJ said. “The Fifth Freedom is freedom from ignorance. It means that every man, everywhere, should be free to develop his talents to their full potential – unhampered by arbitrary barriers of race or birth or income.... The job, of course, will never be finished. For a nation, as for an individual, education is a perpetually unfinished journey, a continuing process of discovery.”

The job of an education is “a perpetually unfinished journey.” There is no shame, then, in scrapping four more years. The nation, we, the people, must respond with a plan as bold as LBJ’s. With students shut out of college or more crushed by debt, and still more unable to complete college in five or even six years, common sense shouts that the four-year bachelor’s degree model is broken and obsolete. What better evidence that the U.S. higher education system is broken than the multibillion-dollar subprime mortgage crash. What education thought up the subprime mortage? What education took out a subprime mortgage? How else could such a flawed idea end?

Such redesigns will not appear overnight. In the meantime

meantime, why don't we do no harm and do something. A national focus on helping our students acquire the critical thinking skills that will allow them to pass both the AP English Language and Composition and the AP Statistics exams will strengthen the nation. Those individuals may even come up with a better idea.

My critics will continue to include the two major lobbies, the American Council on Education and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. The trustees of most colleges and universities, who seldom apply their intellects to developing ideas that support the nation as a whole rather than just their own institutions, also will balk at my ideas.

Beside me, as I write, is the Fact Sheet for the 2009 Budget for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The budget request is for \$50.5 billion, a 6.8 percent increase over 2008. (The U.S. Department of Education budget is \$59.2 billion.) The Homeland Security Fact Sheet headline is "Continue to Protect Our Nation from Dangerous People." Would Abraham Lincoln or Paine wonder, as I do, whether these budget priorities signal that none of us in the U.S., with four-year bachelor's degrees and more, has an education adequate enough to enable us to assess the true risks we, the people, face today? Has anyone in the Department of Homeland Security or the Department of Education read Lincoln's 1838 speech?

*"At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? By what means shall we fortify against it? –*

*Shall*

*Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! – All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest, with a Bonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.*

*“At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”*

Is the four-year degree, with millions shut out, life or suicide? Who crushed the once-mighty U.S. auto industry, foreign invaders or citizens born and educated here? Remember the red-coated British marching in formation and crying “Unfair!” when the Patriots fired from behind trees and shot officers first.

If these well-funded institutions of higher education and the individuals representing them, who raise their loud and articulate voices in unwavering support of the existing four-year system, showed any true interest in relieving the middle class of staggering student-loan debt or ensuring that the single mother working two jobs while trying to get a degree could have free textbooks, I would have no need to make this case for common sense.

Thomas

Thomas Paine had his critics as well, among them some Quakers. In the third edition of *Common Sense*, following “Appendix,” Paine concludes with “Epistle to Quakers,” in which he responded to them directly. He respected their right to their views, but pointed out to them that they had “without proper authority for doing so, put [them]selves in the place of the whole body of the Quakers.” I would ask the American Council on Education whether it speaks for itself, for institutions, or for the nation?

To my critics, I leave you with Paine's final paragraph, addressed to his own:

*“And here, without anger or resentment I bid you farewell. Sincerely wishing, that as men and Christians [I'll add “women, people of all other religions, atheists, and agnostics”], ye may always fully and uninterruptedly enjoy ever civil and religious right; to be, in your turn, the means of securing it to others; but that the example which ye have unwisely set, of mingling religion with politics [for which I'll substitute “of letting institutional and personal interest trump common sense”], may be disavowed and reprobated by every inhabitant of America.”*

To  
Betsy, for everything,  
and to the students, faculty, and staff  
of Bunker Hill Community College,  
who never give up.

With thanks to  
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Without access to copies of the original *Common Sense*,  
made possible by Jayne Giudici, Mary Warnement,  
and Stephen Nonack of the magical Boston Athenaeum,  
this essay might have been just a blog.



*Tireless copyediting: Aina Allen  
Design: Peter Agoos, Agoos D-zines*

*Common Sense* calls for an American educational revolution for the 21st century. The bachelor's degree is obsolete and expensive. That degree started in the 14th century, before Gutenberg, when the pedagogical constraint was the shortage of books. Instead, the nation should focus federal, public funds on being sure that by twenty-one years old, everyone has the critical thinking and language and quantitative skills to pass the Advanced Placement Exams in English Language and Composition and in Statistics.

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"Wick Sloane, a man who could find easier, more prestigious work, spends his time teaching working-class kids at an urban community college. We should read his provocative essay thoughtfully, for it represents the lessons he has learned from young people who scrape every penny together to afford an education."

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"Wick Sloane impolitely insists in this incendiary pamphlet that we actually think about higher education. Wielding questions like a surgical laser, he exposes much of the received wisdom about college as archaic, inequitable or plain wrong. His proposals will bring howls from the educational powers-that-be, proving the old adage: it's not injustice that stings, it's justice."

SCOTT SHANE, REPORTER, NATIONAL SECURITY, THE NEW YORK TIMES

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*Wick Sloane, who writes the column "The Devil's Workshop" for InsideHigherEd.com, holds degrees from the nation's most highly selective institutions of higher education, Williams College and Yale University. Therefore, by the standards of the academy itself, he must be right.*

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